

## **Buddhist Death and Dying – Theravada Tradition**

**June 2015**

### **Procedures and Practices**

#### Buddhist perspective on death

According to the Buddhist definition of death, any living being ceases to exist when its consciousness and body heat are exhausted. Thereafter what remain are substances belonging to four fundamental elements: solidity, liquidity, heat and space. As a matter of fact these elements die and regenerate every moment while a person is living. Therefore even the living body is not a constant entity. The moment of death is another especial instance of this regenerating process where one life ends and another begins, the latter being pre-conditioned by the former according to his or her actions in that life as well as those coming down from previous lives. The Buddhist main goal is to stop this un-ending cycle of death and rebirth. In simple terms, the slightest desire known as “craving” to prolong pleasures in life, causes rebirth after death. The Buddha’s teachings are all about eliminating this craving and terminating rebirth after death. This state is called enlightenment. The Buddhist meditation is applied strictly to cleanse the mind by removing the craving.

After attaining enlightenment the Buddha declared:

*“So many births I have taken in this world, seeking in vain the builder of this house; in my search over and over, I took new birth, new suffering.  
Oh! house builder, now I have seen you, you cannot make a new house for me; all your beams are broken, the ridge pole is shattered; my mind is freed from all the conditionings of the past, and has no more craving for the future.”*

#### What to do before death

Despite the Buddhist teachings, it is a great sorrow for the relatives to go through the death of a loved one. In order to console the relatives and also to avoid any distress to the dying person, the following procedure is generally adhered to :

- Create a suitable environment for the patient to be in a positive and peaceful state of mind in order to understand the reality of the world; avoid any activity or speech that give rise to hatred or anger; never show any sorrow in his presence.
- It is advisable to place a Buddha statue in the room so that the dying person would be reminded of the Buddha’s Dhamma.



- Chanting of *parittas* (selected scriptures) by Buddhist monks could be arranged to comfort the dying person and the family members. It is important that the monks be informed well in advance.
- The dying person should be encouraged to take refuge in the Buddha, the Doctrine and the community of clergy. If he had been practicing meditation, remind him of the importance of mindfulness.
- The dying person may be made to reflect on the good deeds that he has done, and be reassured that these wholesome deeds of his would lead him to a good rebirth where he will be able to lead a comfortable life.
- Friends and relatives who will be gathered to pay visit to the patient should behave in such a manner so that he would be able to maintain clear and positive mental status. It is best to be calm and peaceful; be kind and sensitive and supportive but try to avoid strong emotional reactions such as weeping and wailing before the dying person. This will only disturb him making it difficult for him to spend the final moments.
- Dhamma friends who practice of meditation can also be invited to radiate metta (loving -kindness) to ease the suffering of the sick person.
- Make arrangements with concerned parties, if the patient has given the consent to donate the dead body / body parts.

#### What to do after death

- Immediately after the death, arrangements should be made to remove the body and dispose of any personal articles used by him. The relatives will have no objection to such a removal of the body according to the rules of the hospital.
- The hospital authorities may take necessary steps to give access to other patients to continue the use of health facilities at the hospital.

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